

SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE  
Little Willow Creek Protective Oil and Gas Lease Sale  
Four Rivers Field Office  
July 8, 2014

**Introduction**

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Boise District, Four Rivers Field Office proposal to offer multiple parcels (997 acres BLM surface jurisdiction and 5,355 acres of federal mineral estate with private surface ownership) at a competitive oil and gas lease sale. The lease sale would protect the federal mineral resource from uncompensated drainage in and to the north and east of the Willow Field located in Township 8 North, Range 4 West, Boise Meridian, Payette County, Idaho (see attached map). The BLM is proposing protective leasing because Alta Mesa Services, Inc. is intending to drill four wells on private land, two of which would drain minerals reserved to the United States.

An Environmental Assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act will be used to determine if leasing is appropriate and, if so, what stipulations should be associated with the lease. Issuance of a competitive oil and gas lease(s) would give the lessee exclusive rights to explore and develop federal oil and gas mineral resources but would not authorize surface-disturbing activities. If the lessee desires to drill into federal lands, additional NEPA analyses will be required.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposed oil and gas leasing. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives that meet the purpose of and need for the project. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an EA with an estimated completion date of September 2014.

**Purpose and Need for Action**

The purpose of this proposal is to protect the federal mineral resource from uncompensated drainage and surface resources from potential damage. Uncompensated drainage means that federal mineral resources are being produced by adjacent wells without paying the United States royalties required by the Mineral Leasing Act, as amended.

This action is needed because Alta Mesa is proposing to drill gas wells on private land adjacent to BLM-administered lands and on lands where BLM controls the subsurface mineral estate. The current and proposed wells in and north of the Willow Field constitute a threat, or potential threat, of uncompensated drainage to the federal mineral estate.

**Existing Condition**

The proposed lease sale area is located approximately five miles east of Payette, Idaho, and just north of Highway 52 and Big Willow Creek and encompasses a portion of Rock Quarry Gulch, the Patton Canal, and Little Willow Creek. The area is within the Snake River Plain major land resource area (MLRA). Snake River Plain MLRA topography is characterized by sloping lava plateaus with gently to moderately sloping alluvial fans (cone-shaped deposits of sediment

crossed and built up by streams), terraces, and bottom lands. Soils are mainly loams, silt loams, and coarse sandy loams with moderate to high potential for erosion (based on K-factor erosion susceptibility index). Elevations in the proposed lease sale area range from 2,300 to 2,800 feet.

Vegetation communities are largely dominated by cheatgrass, an invasive annual grass, and introduced annual forbs (e.g., tall tumblemustard). Perennial plant species occasionally present include Sandberg bluegrass, rabbitbrush, and crested wheatgrass. Several wildlife species occupy the area including, but not limited to: southern Idaho ground squirrel, mule deer, badger, hawks, and several reptile species.

The proposed leasing area contains private and public lands. There are 997 acres with BLM surface jurisdiction and 5,355 acres of federal mineral estate with private surface ownership (see attached map). Private surface ownership with public mineral subsurface is called split estate. Split estate is a result of the surface rights and mineral rights being severed under the terms of the Nation's homesteading laws. These and other Federal laws, regulations, and BLM policy directives, give managers the authority and direction for administering the development of Federal oil and natural gas resources beneath privately owned surface.

### **Process**

The oil and gas development process occurs in four steps: 1) planning and leasing; 2) permitting; 3) drilling and production; and 4) surface reclamation (see attached figure titled "Oil and Gas Development Process"). This proposal only addresses Step 1. Future permitting, drilling, and production on BLM surface lands or BLM mineral estate would require an official permit to be filed after which the BLM would initiate additional NEPA analysis with further opportunities for public participation and comment.

### **Preliminary Issues**

BLM has identified the following preliminary issues since the proposed action is only the planning and leasing step of the oil and gas development process. While no ground disturbing activities would occur during this step, stipulations specific would be developed in follow-up analyses if the lessor applies for additional permits.

1. Issuing oil and gas leases in the Willow Field would prevent uncompensated drainage resulting in federal mineral resources being produced by adjacent wells without paying the United States royalties required by the Mineral Leasing Act, as amended.
2. Issuing oil and gas leases in the Willow Field would allow the BLM to analyze environmental, biological, and social concerns if additional actions are taken in the Oil and Gas Development Process.

### **Decision to be Made**

The decision to be made by the Four Rivers Field Manager is whether the lands are eligible for leasing, and whether to recommend any stipulations to the lease in addition to the standard terms and conditions.

### **Public Input Needed**

Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by August 11, 2014 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. Comments can be sent hard copy to the letterhead address in attention of “Little Willow Creek Lease Scoping” or alternatively submitted electronically to [blm\\_id\\_littlewillowcrkleasescoping@blm.gov](mailto:blm_id_littlewillowcrkleasescoping@blm.gov). The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

BLM will host an open house public meeting on July 17, 2014, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. in the District Court room of the Payette County Courthouse, located at 1130 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue North, Payette, Idaho. You will have an opportunity to ask questions about the leasing process and comment on this proposal at the public meeting.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Matt McCoy, Four Rivers Assistant Field Manager (208-384-3343).

### **Attachments**

- 1 - Map 1: Proposed BLM Oil and Gas Protective Leasing Area
- 2 - Figure 1: Oil and Gas Development Process